

A Man Called Ove [15] 2015|Sweden|116 min

UK release date	30th June 2017
Director	Hannes Holm
Screenplay	Hannes Holm
Cinematographer	Göran Hallberg
Cast	Rolf Låssgård (Ove); Bahar Pars (Parvaneh); Filip Berg (Young Ove)

With the recent news that Jack Nicholson has been coaxed out of semi-retirement to star in the US remake of Maren Ade's *Toni Erdmann*, it's not hard to imagine the newly minted octogenarian following it up with a hypothetical redo of *A Man Called Ove*, Sweden's nominee for this year's foreign film Oscar. Played with bellicose gusto by Rolf Lassgård, its cantankerous, disdainful titular character – at first glance a misanthropic busybody with an obsessive-compulsive routine and an aversion to anything newfangled – bears distinct echoes of the grumps Nicholson inhabited in both *As Good As It Gets* (1997) and *About Schmidt* (2002). As in the former film, it takes the unaffected overtures of a kind young woman – here, pregnant Iranian immigrant Parvaneh (Bahar Pars) – to thaw the iceman out and excavate the pain that lies behind the irascible exterior.

The film is directed in workmanlike fashion by Hannes Holm from Fredrik Backman's hugely popular novel, and there's little in its ultimately sentimental trajectory that truly surprises. What it does possess is a morbid streak that – initially, at least – can be arresting as a counterbalance to the sometimes aggressively quirky storytelling elsewhere. Bereft after the recent loss of his beloved wife Sonja to cancer, and pressured into retiring from his job of 43 years by callow new management, Ove Lindahl subsists as a self-appointed caretaker of his nondescript small-town neighbourhood. He resolves to end it all to join Sonja, but his numerous suicide attempts are continually interrupted by the unwitting Parvaneh, who has moved into the house opposite with her family.

These unhurried, darkly farcical scenes are unflinching in their depiction of Ove's makeshift preparations for his demise. Ove is, indeed, "really bad at dying", as one character points out. But he has also been, as it turns out, a hardy survivor over the decades. Generous flashbacks chronicle a youth punctuated by tragedy and

misfortune, much of it freakish in nature. Having lost his mother as a child, the teenage Ove sees his father, a railway mechanic, killed by a speeding locomotive. Later, the family home burns down, an event that puts Ove forever at odds with the petty council bureaucrats he derisively calls “whiteshirts”.

In the face of all this adversity, it’s revealing that the young Ove obsessively sets his mind to fixing inanimate things rather than engaging with humankind. Sleeping rough on the railways facilitates an unconventional meet-cute with Sonja, whose almost saintly compassion allows her to break through Ove’s reserve. Holm, who doubles on writing duties, paints Ove as something of a dinosaur who doesn’t suffer fools and who despises authoritarian types. But he’s no bigot, at one point providing sanctuary to a Bosnian teenager shunned by his parents for coming out (“Are you one of those gays?” Ove enquires bemusedly). Would-be oppressors are fought tooth and nail, such as the absurdly villainous ‘whiteshirt’ who tries to install an old friend in a nursing home against his will.

Lassgård is a commanding presence and Pars an amiable foil, but the more Ove warms up, the more the narrative becomes laboured and trite. As the macabre bite of the film’s early going gradually recedes, the increasingly lachrymose remainder leaves it feeling a little toothless.

Matthew Taylor, Sight and Sound, July 2017

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